

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Wisconsin Works: Meeting the Needs of Harder to Serve Populations
A White Paper Commissioned by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

Kelly S. Mikelson
The Urban Institute
2001

Wisconsin Works (W-2), Wisconsin's welfare reform program, replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program in September 1997. As part of Wisconsin's effort to move W-2 participants to self-sufficiency, participants are limited to 24 months in any one paid W-2 placement. However, despite the efforts of clients and case managers, statewide a small percentage of W-2 participants are unable to move from a paid position into unsubsidized employment due to one or more barriers to work they are facing. These clients are considered the harder to serve W-2 clients. For these clients, initial and subsequent six-month extensions to the 24-month time limit may be applied for by the W-2 agency and approved by Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development.

Through an analysis of Wisconsin's CARES administrative data and W-2 participant File data from January 1999 through June 2000 as well as semistructured interviews with several W-2 agencies, this white paper describes the extension population. Specifically, we examined the demographic characteristics, work activities, and barriers to self-sufficiency of the clients with and without an extension and why 1,345 clients did not have an extension. In addition, we present a logistic model which predicts the likelihood, controlling for several known characteristics, that clients in W-2 Transitions will have an extension. Finally, we discuss the extension process in the five W-2 agencies contacted and describe efforts at the state and local level to develop guidance on the process for extending the 60-month time limit for harder to serve clients.

Characteristics and Work Activities of the Extension and Nonextension Populations

Clients in the W-2 Transitions and Community Service Jobs employment positions may be eligible for an extension either because of significant barriers they face—in the case of W-2 Transitions clients—or because of labor market conditions which preclude finding unsubsidized employment—in the case of clients in Community Service Jobs.

Analysis of the CARES data yield the following descriptions of the extension population:

- Of the 1,551 W-2 participants who reached 21 months in one employment category, 206 (13 percent) had an extension to the 24-month time limit while 1,345 (87 percent) did not have an extension as of June 2000.
- About three-quarters of W-2 participants with a W-2 agency extension request were approved while the remaining one-quarter were withdrawn or were moved into another employment position by the W-2 agency.
- Of those 206 clients who had an extension, the overwhelming majority were in W-2 Transitions positions during the 21st month when the extension was approved, and a small percentage were in Community Service Jobs.
- On average, clients with an extension were somewhat older and three times as likely to have a disabled person in their assistance group than clients without an extension.
- In general, other participant characteristics such as race, education, and number of children made little if any difference in the likelihood of having an extension, suggesting that extension policies are equally applied to all demographic groups.
- One in 10 clients living in Milwaukee County who reached 21 months had an extension while nearly half of clients living in Balance-of-State counties who reached 21 months had an extension.
- W-2 participants are required to participate in activities assigned by their case manager. The top three activities for the extension population were physical rehabilitation, mental health counseling, and work experience.

- On the other hand, the top three activities for the nonextension population were work experience, employment search, and adult basic education.

Barriers to Self-Sufficiency for the Extension Population

- Of the 206 clients with an extension, the vast majority face multiple barriers to self-sufficiency. The most common barriers to self-sufficiency facing the extension population are depression, various physical barriers, and a lack of education.
- Many clients with an extension were seeking services through other programs such as SSI/SSDI and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the data analysis, semistructured interviews with selected W-2 agency staff, discussions with state agency staff, and a review of the literature, the following are recommendations offered to the DWD for consideration in meeting the needs of harder to serve W-2 participants.

First, continue to provide technical assistance to W-2 agencies to assist them in developing and providing services for harder to serve W-2 participants. Examples of technical assistance may include:

- training case managers to specialize in intensive short-term and long-term maintenance services depending on the needs of the client as well as additional training for all staff on using screening and assessment procedures for barriers to employment; and
- strategizing with the W-2 agencies to develop innovative services for harder to serve W-2 participants.

Second, facilitate and encourage interagency initiatives to address the barriers to work among the harder to serve population. Increased collaboration with public and private programs or organizations may assist in cross-referrals, planning, developing innovative strategies, or sharing expertise in working with people with disabilities. Examples of collaboration include:

- partnering with child welfare agencies and mental health and substance abuse providers to provide comprehensive services for hard to serve participants, noncustodial parents, and their families;
- partnering with health care providers to address disabling conditions that are barriers to work; and
- partnering with Division of Vocational Rehabilitation counselors as well as local businesses, technical colleges, and other public, nonprofit, or community-based organizations to develop supported work opportunities for W-2 recipients.

Third, improve the transition from W-2 to SSI/SSDI and encourage W-2 agencies that are not already doing so to rely on expertise during the SSI/SSDI appeals process. Examples of an improved transition include early identification of potential SSI/SSDI applicants, a joint application, medical documentation, and standards for determining a client's ability to work.

Fourth, continue to promote research on harder to serve W-2 participants and continue to track W-2 participants after they leave the W-2 system. This white paper presents only a small part of what can be examined using the CARES and W-2 participant File data. Future analysis can add to the growing body of literature on hard to serve welfare clients and continue to inform Wisconsin's policy decisions.